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Book Review
by John Simoulidis

Food Sovereignty in Canada: Creating Just and Sustainable Food Systems. Edited by *Hanna Wittman, Annette Aurélie Desmarais, & Nettie Wiebe*. Halifax, NS, and Winnipeg, MB: Fernwood, 2011. 219 pp. ISBN 9781552664438

What kind of food system does Canada have? Is it just and sustainable? Is an alternative food system possible? The answers drawn from reading this collection are sobering and distressing on the first two counts, but hopeful on the last. This volume, along with an earlier collection by the same editors (Wittman, Desmarais, & Wiebe, 2010), grew out of a conference on "Food Sovereignty" held at the University of Saskatchewan in 2008. Many of the contributors are members of the National Farmers Union (NFU), a founding member of a transnational peasant and farmers' movement called La Via Campesina. This movement embraces a vision of food sovereignty in conscious opposition to the prevailing "neoliberal industrialized food system." Its ultimate aim is to "put the control of productive resources… in the hands of those who produce food" (p. 5).

"Food sovereignty" embodies an alternative moral idea of what our food systems ought to be for: sustaining livelihoods, ecosystems, and lives. These social ends—which *are* economic ends—ought to be given precedence over profit-maximization. Achieving food sovereignty requires shifting our food systems away from linear profit-driven "food chains" towards multi-dimensional just and sustainable "food webs" (pp. 16-17). While there is little sustained theoretical analysis of the nature of capitalist profit-oriented agriculture, the readers of this journal will find that the idea of "food sovereignty" offers fertile ground for studying and mapping out the size and structure of the social economy and non-profit sectors in Canadian agriculture.

The opening chapter by Weibe and Wipf outlines the recent history of the food sovereignty movement and the challenges, obstacles, and promise this holds for Canada. This movement emerged as a response to the impact of neoliberal globalization on agriculture and trade across the world in the 1980s. While its practical meaning might vary, the concept of food sovereignty can be broadly understood "as the right of nations and peoples to control their own food systems, including their own markets, production modes, food cultures and environment" (p. 4). Food security is rooted in power relations, and is thus fundamentally political. A paradigm shift towards a food system based on food sovereignty depends on seeing how "sustainable food production and genuine food security are a function of community-based control over the food system" (p. 5).

In chapter two, Qualman examines Canada's neoliberal food system and argues that any objective consideration of its effects makes the "strongest possible case for food sovereignty-based policies" (p. 21).

Farmers increasingly rely on off-farm income, agricultural support programs, and debt-financed industrial expansion. One of the more alarming observations he makes is that while our agricultural system has generated three-quarters of a trillion dollars worth of agricultural goods since 1985, the net market income of farmers (excluding state transfers) was *zero* over the same period (p. 20). The state of our agricultural system is symptomatic of a classic staples trap that is ultimately turning farmers into sharecroppers and serfs who are increasingly vulnerable to being dispossessed of their land (p. 35).

In chapter three, Beingessner's interview of Terry Boehm and Hilary Moore (former NFU president and current president of NFU Local 310 – Lanark County) provides insight into the practical meaning of the statistical realities that Qualman identifies for small- and medium-sized farmers and rural communities. Much of the discussion here (and throughout the book) revolves around the hard choices farmers face between adapting to the requirements of "capitalist agriculture" and using food sovereignty as the basis of constructing an alternative "mode of production." In chapter seven, Magnon's analysis of the "limits of farmer-control" in his case study of the (recently eviscerated) Canada Wheat Board (CWB) is instructive with respect to the limits of market-power based strategies which frame "farmer cooperation in terms of economic goals" (p. 115). Farmers who do not embrace the (capitalist) industrial model of agricultural production find themselves marginalized within the policy-making process.

Can the policy-making process be made more democratic and inclusive? In chapter four, Roppel, Desmarais, and Martz (2006) present the conclusions from a report they authored that uses a food sovereignty framework to argue for empowering women in the agricultural policy development process. Building on this report, the authors summarize "what kind of agriculture and food policy women farmers might propose in its place" (p. 60). The outline of this alternative (Figure 4-2 and Appendix) speaks to the need to: "strengthen farmers' power in the food chain," "ensure public ownership of genetic resources and seeds," "shift government focus from free trade to fair trade," "support farm women's leadership development," and "acknowledge benefit of, and increase focus on, non-intensive production systems" (p. 73). This is a policy framework that explicitly values, and can contribute to the development of, the social economy.

The "food sovereignty" movement in Canada overlaps with social economy and non-profit sector research areas in a variety of ways. There is Kneen's analysis in chapter five of the history of Food Secure Canada, a network of community-based groups, food advocacy organizations, and farmers that was formed in 1999. Its aim is to promote food sovereignty through forging direct relationships between food consumers and producers, promoting information sharing, and policy advocacy (People's Food Policy Project, 2011). In chapter six, Morrison's analysis of the long history of the idea and practice of food sovereignty in Indigenous communities highlights the struggle to maintain, against social and economic marginalization, an ecologically-grounded food system that "recognizes the ways in which the ability to grow healthy food is directly connected to maintaining the health and integrity of neighbouring Indigenous ecosystems" (p. 99).

In chapter eight, Engler-Stringer seeks to integrate a food sovereignty perspective into community nutrition and health education programs so that the "social and environmental relations around food" can be made visible both to consumers and community health practitioners. In chapter nine, Hansen provides an insightful and instructive analysis of urban agriculture and a history of community gardening: we can grow a culture of civic engagement in our own backyards. Friedman's analysis in chapter ten explores the historical role civil society organizations (like FoodShare) have played in promoting social innovation in the infrastructure of a local agri-food economy (the Golden Horsehoe region). She traces out many examples of efforts in and around Toronto to "scale up" networks "of small private and social enterprises" (p. 171), which have helped close the gap between rural producers and urban consumers of food. In chapter eleven, Wittman and

> Barbolet examine the "policy contradictions and structural constraints for developing and strengthening sustainable food systems" in BC given the prevailing "neoliberal food regime" and the efforts of organizations like Local Food First to overcome it (p. 192).

What kind of food system do Canadians want and need? This volume contributes to this debate on behalf of an alternative vision based on food sovereignty and shows how elements of this alternative are already being implemented across the country. The political struggles that are needed to bring about a just and sustainable food system are tremendously complex—there are a variety of sites of struggle at the local, provincial, national, and global levels. Local struggles cannot be divorced from those over global neoliberal free-market policies and institutional arrangements: there can be no food sovereignty if agri-business is successful in its push for the inclusion of intellectual property rights (for instance, genetically modified organisms, and seed patenting) in global free trade agreements. The food security of all Canadians depends on positive outcomes from all of these struggles.

References

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